

CULTIVATED TRAGEDY: ART, AESTHETICS, AND TERRORISM IN DON DELILLO'S *FALLING MAN*

By Jen Bartlett

“We are not free and the sky can still fall on our heads. Above all, theatre is meant to teach us this.”
(*The Theatre and Its Double*, 60)

On September 11th 2001, the sky did just that and the photogenic skyline of New York City came tumbling down. In a controversial New York Times article, Karl-Heinz Stockhausen termed these events “the greatest work of art in the whole cosmos” and although this outraged the nation at the time and was quickly suppressed, it does not make the theoretical approach any less valid. Don DeLillo’s works and his ongoing exploration of authorship and terrorism are an encapsulation of Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe’s observation that “the impulse to create transgressive art and the impulse to commit violence lie perilously close to each other.” Exponents of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk' or 'total art work' advocated an attack on all senses and emotions. Wagner and Runge, amongst others, believed that if one unified the visual, aural and textual arts into one completely integrated whole, the effect on the audience would be of such power that great personal, and consequently social, change or revolution could be effected (Grey 1995). Artaud developed these principles further in his 'Theatre of Cruelty' by moving from representations of an experience to providing the audience with the actual experience. Watching his play *Plague*, Anaïs Nin found that instead of “an objective conference on the theater [sic] and the plague” the audience members were forced to undergo the experience of “the plague itself” (192). Vomiting was actually induced in various spectators. Artaud the playwright acts as Artaud the aesthetic terrorist, assaulting the senses, the body and the consciousness of his audience. DeLillo states in *Mao II* that the writer should “make raids on human consciousness” in order to “alter the inner life of the culture” (41). This transgressive, frequently invasive, theory of art is focused towards creating social and psychological transformation and bears a striking similarity to acts of terrorism, which are allegedly employed to engender social change.

However, EH Gombrich posits that “there really is no such thing as Art; there are only artists” (15). He places the emphasis firmly on the artist’s submission to the aforementioned transgressive impulse. To focus on the artist then, the Oxford English Dictionary paints a grim picture, a shadowy figure far from the genial, bearded, West Bank bohemian of childhood stereotypes. The artist is one who pursues a practical science such as alchemy, chemistry or mechanics. He is a follower of a pursuit by which skill comes through practice and organisation. There is a perpetual emphasis on 'pursuit' in the OED entry, as if the artist by merely existing is intrinsically bound in a hunt although there is no conclusion drawn as to whether the artist is hunter or hunted. DeLillo has previously explored these issues and, in *Mao II*, Bill Gray is both hunter and hunted. The artist of the OED is a schemer, an elusive figure full of guile and deceit, one of “those slippery wily artists, who can veer any whither with any wind” (Barrow qtd. in OED ‘artist III.9). Yet he is more than a mythical bogeyman content to remain in the shadows. He is “a public performer,”(‘artist’ III.7.b), a man of action, and the opposite of a theorist. At his most sinister, the artist can be defined as a cultivator of tragedy.¹

The link between the figure of the artist and that of the terrorist is disturbingly simple. J Epstein put it best in 1978 when he declared, “I am not interested in being regarded as a benefactor of mankind. I am an artist” (qtd. in OED ‘artist’ III.6.a). It would appear then that the principal difference between the artist and terrorist is one of intent, as opposed to outcome. Nevertheless, this distinction is somewhat fixed and does not admit or allow for the possibility of a symbiotic or synergistic relationship.

In terms of sheer theatricality, the attacks of 9/11 easily outclass even Artaud's apocalyptic visions. The collapse of “a tower that soars to heaven and goes unpunished by God”(103), to employ DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* terminology, provided a plethora of iconic images allowing the world outside of New York to 'experience' the event. For the great majority of the world's population, living through

¹ According to the OED definition of ‘artist’ I.2 an artist is anyone who cultivates one of the disciplines presided over by the Muses. Tragedy was discipline number five presided over by Melpomene.

9/11 was a postmodern experience. Although we now inhabit a world irrevocably altered by the events and we claim to have memories of them, what we actually possess are memories of the reports of 9/11, the film clips and photographs we saw like dramatic reviews, the disruptions caused in our daily routines and our responses to images emitted through our television screens. Our experience was mediated by media. The images published in the papers were artistically composed, dramatic iconography intent on creating shock. In studying contemporary representations of 9/11 in the media, Donna Spalding Andréolle explores the use of pictures of the Twin Towers as opposed to images of the Pentagon:

It is obvious that the collapse of two 110-storey buildings which housed the offices of America's most powerful financial institutions offers far more promise in terms of symbolic interpretation and meaning. The potential for drama is equally high through intertextual reference to disaster movies such as *The Towering Inferno* or *Independence Day* (2003).

This was borne out in the media coverage. Images of WTC1 and 2 burning were the lead pictures for 85 of 122 front covers of daily papers in America. Pictures of the Pentagon made four front covers, none of which as the lead picture.

The burning building is a familiar trope to a Western, film-going audience. The artistic subversion in this case is that 9/11 was not a Hollywood disaster movie. The aeroplanes crashed, the buildings collapsed, and the heroes died without first saving the world. “Slavoj Žižek presents the TV coverage of 9/11 as the Hitchcock moment of horror that is actually happening; it is the intrusion of the real into fiction” (Sicher and Skradol 151). The result of this media-induced distance is that we are unable to provide an emotional response to choking on the dust in our breath or feeling the glass piercing our skin because we lived through these events vicariously, separated by time, distance, nationality and electronic equipment. Outside of America, the world underwent 9/11 in the capacity of a six billion strong audience victimised by proxy.

“For Virilio and Žižek, the spectacular deliberateness of the planned *spectacle* of the 9/11 attack demonstrates the truth in Karl-Heinz Stockhausen's provocative statement that the image of the planes hitting the WTC towers was the ultimate work of art” (170). This intent on creating a visual spectacle is represented and repeated by DeLillo in Janiak's meticulous planning of his performances. The somewhat poetic choice of date mimicking North America's emergency telephone number must also be considered although in the great artistic traditions of convention reversal, the events of 9/11 created the emergency. Theoretically the emergency occurs and then 9-1-1 is called. In this case 9/11 occurred and the state of emergency was called for afterwards.

The figure of DeLillo's 'Falling Man', David Janiak, assumes the position of the original 'Falling Man', one of the workers who jumped from the North Tower and was captured in the famous photograph by Richard Drew. Janiak's terror-inducing actions in creating an artistic spectacle are the first of DeLillo's methods exploring the theory that terror through spectacle is art. His sudden unexpected appearances echo the 9/11 attacks. There is a certain background level of suspicion attached to him; he is known to operate in New York and the content of his performances are predictable. This dossier of information notwithstanding, the physical and temporal locations of his appearances are as unknown, and consequently as traumatic, as the activities of a well-known terrorist such as Osama Bin Laden. It is not a question of 'if' he will appear, or attack in the case of Bin Laden; it is a case of 'when'. The Falling Man possesses the element of shock and thus is similarly in possession of great power. DeLillo appears to support the concept that the artist is a transgressive figure. If Keith were “the raging artist,” “he'd be allowed to behave unspeakably” (*Falling Man* 12). Instead he is a lawyer, an occupation that defines itself as staying very firmly within the boundaries. There is a certain tyranny in violating these limits. DeLillo constructs a dichotomy between Keith and David Janiak; one the man of theory, the other the man of action; the rule abider against the rule breaker; the drifter juxtaposed with the focused planner, eventually ending with the living contrasted with the dead. In

structuring this dichotomy over the course of the novel, DeLillo leads us to make the inevitable extension to it; thus if Keith is a victim of terror, it follows that Janiak must be a perpetrator of terror.

His methods of perpetration, the performances themselves, repeat this concept of terror through spectacle on several levels. Not only is there the terrifying randomness with which they seem to appear, but there is also the evocation of the most taboo image to emerge from that day. 'The Falling Man' appeared briefly in newspapers on September 12th 2001 but its publication caused such public outcry that it was rapidly withdrawn. Even now, the official line of the New York Medical Examiner's Office is that "nobody jumped. They were forced out, or blown out" (qtd. in Junod 2008).

The impact of this controversial image was dramatic:

It was, at last, the sight of the jumpers that provided the corrective to those who insisted on saying that what they were witnessing was 'like a movie,' for this was an ending as unimaginable as it was unbearable: Americans responding to the worst terrorist attack in the history of the world ... with one prolonged act of -- if these words can be applied to mass murder -- mass suicide (Junod).

The Falling Man acts as a flashback, a physical reincarnation of the nightmare, ensuring that for DeLillo's New Yorkers the experience "of those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump" (*FM* 33) is re-lived. His performances "assault memory, efface the distinction between the real and the fictional, and insinuate a complicitous relationship between viewer and viewed" (Green 572). In miming the photograph, itself a work of art, the Falling Man conflates art, reality, memory and terror in one united attack on the consciousness. It is "too near and deep, too personal" (*FM* 33) not to elicit terror and pain. His artistic performance involves his physical presence although he was evidently not one of those who jumped from the tower, thus his tangibility provides what Sicher and Skradol term "the nightmare of a real *now* ness in a cosmic uncertainty"(175). For those of his viewers who were not in the towers he is the disaster movie come to life; he is the ultimate

intrusion of the real into fiction. In an ironic twist it may be said that Janiak is more real than the anonymous man in the photograph. His fictional physicality is somehow more distressing than two-dimensional reproduction of reality. Janiak provides the 'human touch'. Just as 9/11 was witnessed from a distance, as readers we are distanced from the Falling Man by his fictionality. The intermediary this time is that of text. His fame is spread through newspapers, or in the case of those who witness his acts "by cell phone, intimately, as in the towers and in the hijacked planes" (*FM* 165). Again there is produced this sense of disassociation induced by the media interceding between the real and the audience. Furthermore, in viewing Janiak, we are distanced by text from viewing a representation of a reproduction of the real.

The photograph of 'The Falling Man' is remarkable for its perfect artistry, its totally factual basis and its simultaneous absolute inability to convey the panic, confusion and mayhem of 9/11. What it does convey is a terrible sense of calm:

The man in the picture ... is perfectly vertical, and so is in accord with the lines of the buildings behind him. He splits them, bisects them: Everything to the left of him in the picture is the North Tower, everything to the right, the South. Though oblivious to the geometric balance he has achieved, he is the essential element in the creation of a new flag, a banner composed entirely of steel bars shining in the sun (Junod).

As Junod wrote, "if he were not falling, he might very well be flying." It is the audience who provides the context, and thus the emotion to the photograph just as the consciousness of DeLillo's New Yorkers supplies Janiak with the audience reaction. This is the 'Theatre of Cruelty' at its most cruel, inducing both Lianne and the reading audience to feel "drained and wasted" (*FM* 169). The man in the photograph who falls is the embodiment of human fears about death. "The single falling figure ... trails a collective dread" (*FM* 33). Despite our knowledge that he is about to die, his tranquillity evokes an ascent to Heaven whilst his downward trajectory mimics the descent to Hell although in an ironic twist

he is travelling away from the flames. He is Death personified. The definition of the personification of Death is “the King of Terrors” (OED def. 3 ‘terror’). This photograph might be termed the ultimate ‘still life.’ In selecting this image as the epicentre of his novel, DeLillo has chosen a consummate example of art that causes utter terror.

DeLillo uses his personal art, that of literature, to continue this theme and to create his own work of art that fulfils the same criteria as Drew's photograph. His writing of *Falling Man* causes his literary art to converge with memory and vision and thus create terror. Simply in viewing the front cover of the novel we are confronted by our memories. In reading the text we are confronted by our fears.

DeLillo subtly manipulates his text to mimic the events of 9/11. Personal pronouns spatter through the opening chapters like organic shrapnel before eventually emerging from the body of text many pages later as characters with names and personalities. The identities of the 9/11 casualties were assembled from bone fragments or DNA samples and, more importantly, the lives and characters of the hijackers were pieced together from various sources after the towers fell. Similarly, the reader must construct the identities of Keith and Lianne in a fashion verging on a forensic investigation. The first time that Keith's body and actions are associated with Keith, rather than with an ambiguous “he” or “his,” is on the sixteenth page when splinters are pulled out of “Keith's face” (*FM* 16) yet he is first encountered in the book's second sentence. This oblique approach to the novel's protagonists creates an atmosphere of simultaneous confusion and suspicion, miming that which permeated American society immediately after the 9/11 attacks. Like an artist, the reader must pursue the characters through the pages and devise them from their splintered components in a mechanical manner. In requiring this effort and input from his reader DeLillo forces the reader to be complicit in his artistic and aesthetic assault on the fractured and vulnerable society of New York. We are decentralised; adrift in a seemingly familiar world, that of the novel, which is not what we think it ought to be. Just as New

York was emotionally shattered by the loss of its sense of security, we are unable to identify the main characters for several pages, let alone identify with them, and consequently our tenuous link to the novel leaves us feeling unsettled and lost.

This decentralisation and the pervading, almost oxymoronic, sense of numbness echoing the numbness of grief contributes to the main criticism of *Falling Man*, namely that the prose itself is “symptomatically numb” (Gray 133). It reproduces the symptom but evades the trauma. According to Richard Gray, DeLillo's portrayal of grief is so recognisable that “it adds next to nothing to our understanding of the trauma at the heart of the action” (133). Had DeLillo set out to create the definitive tract on the long-term effects of trauma on a population then *Falling Man* would possibly fall short. However it may be argued that he is merely “registering that *something* traumatic— perhaps too dreadful for words, unsusceptible as yet to understanding —has happened” (131) and is, in fact, focusing on the artistic ramifications of this 'something'.

Furthermore, I would contend that DeLillo does not dismiss trauma. Trauma was defined by Freud “in terms of an event the full horror of which is not and cannot be assimilated or experienced fully at the time but only belatedly. It is not “available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (Caruth qtd. in Gray 128). Through the figure of Janiak, DeLillo ensures that the memories are recalled and that the events of 9/11 impose themselves repeatedly on both the real and fictional audiences.

In forcing America to re-confront the events of 9/11 through a work of literature, just as his fictional New Yorkers confront their memories through the performance artist David Janiak, DeLillo is himself committing an act of terrorism in creating his work of art. Through the violence enacted on the mind of the observer or reader, *Falling Man* demands that we reconsider Stockhausen's controversial assertion as well as re-evaluating our own 'experience' of 9/11. As DeLillo said in a 1991 interview, “true terror has language and vision” (qtd. in Passero 77). *Falling Man* is the language of a vision.

Although David Janiak is a fictional construct, the images of both him and, by association, the image of the anonymous man in the white jacket falling from the tower are evoked through DeLillo's language. In shaping his novel of ekphrasis, DeLillo disproves his earlier statement from *Mao II*, “the more clearly we see terror, the less impact we feel from art” (*MII* 157) by displaying terror as art and art, or more specifically artists, as capable of inducing terror. *Falling Man* combines the new tragic narrative of “midair explosions and crumbled buildings” (157) with Lentricchia and McAuliffe’s “Romantic tradition of the artist as Satan- rebellious and anarchical, the bearer of transgression against all that oppresses” to both continue DeLillo's career-spanning dialogue between authorship and terrorism and to validate Stockhausen's contention whilst reminding the reader of their own fragile humanity; that “fantasies of wealth and power” can just as easily become “fantasies of destruction”(FM 116).

Works Cited

- Andréolle, Donna Spalding. *Media Representations of "the Story of 9-11" and the Reconstruction of the American Cultural Imagination*.
www.unierfurt.de/eestudies/eese/artic23/andrea/3_2003.html. Web. 6th February 2009.
- Artaud, Antonin. 'The Spurt of Blood', from *Collected Works Vol 1*, trans. V. Corti, London: John Calder, 1968. Print.
- _____. *The Theatre and Its Double*. (trans.) V. Corti. London: Calder Publications, 1993. Print.
- DeLillo, Don. *Mao II*. Penguin: Toronto, 1991. Print.
- _____. *Cosmopolis*. Picador: London, 2003. Print.
- _____. *Falling Man*. Picador: London, 2007. Print.
- Gray Richard. "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis." *American Literary History*. Vol. 21, No. 1, Spring 2009: 128-148. *Project Muse*. Web. 11th February 2009.
- Green, Jeremy. "Disaster Footage: Spectacles of Violence in DeLillo's Fiction." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*. Vol. 45, No3, Fall 1999: 571-599. *Project Muse*. 3rd February 2009.
- Gombrich, E.H. *The Story of Art*. London: Phaidon Press, 2001. (1st ed. 1950). Print.
- Lentricchia, Frank and Jody McAuliffe. *An interview with Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe, authors of Crimes of Art and Terror, for U of Chicago Press*.
<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/472051in.html>. Web. 10th February 2009.
- Nin, Anaïs. *The Diary of Anaïs Nin Volume 1: 1931-1934*. Gunther Stuhlmann (ed). New York: Swallow Press, 1966. Print.
- Updike, John. *Terrorist*. Penguin: London, 2006. Print.
- Grey, Thomas S. *Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts*. Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 1995. Print.
- Junod, Tom. *The Falling Man*. www.esquire.com. 11 September 2008. Web. 4th February 2009.

Skradol, Natalia and Efraim Sicher. "A World Neither Brave Nor New: Reading Dystopian Fiction after 9/11." *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, Vol. 4, No. 1, January 2006: 151-179. *Project Muse*. Web. 5th February 2009.

www.oed.com The Oxford English Dictionary online. Web. 4th February 2009.